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Statement of purpose

Taking stock of the universe of positions and goals that constitutes Leftist politics today, we are left with the disquieting suspicion that a deep commonality underlies the apparent variety: What exists today is built upon the desiccated remains of what was once possible.

In order to make sense of the present, we find it necessary to disentangle the vast accumulation of positions on the Left and to evaluate their saliency for the possible reconstitution of emancipatory politics in the present. Doing this implies a reconsideration of what is meant by the Left.

Our task begins from what we see as the general disenchantment with the present state of progressive politics. We feel that this disenchantment cannot be cast off by sheer will, by simply “carrying on the fight,” but must be addressed and itself made an object of critique. Thus we begin with what immediately confronts us.

The *Platypus Review* is motivated by its sense that the Left is disoriented. We seek to be a forum among a variety of tendencies and approaches on the Left—not out of a concern with inclusion for its own sake, but rather to provoke disagreement and to open shared goals as sites of contestation. In this way, the recriminations and accusations arising from political disputes of the past may be harnessed to the project of clarifying the object of Leftist critique.

The *Platypus Review* hopes to create and sustain a space for interrogating and clarifying positions and orientations currently represented on the Left, a space in which questions may be raised and discussions pursued that would not otherwise take place. As long as submissions exhibit a genuine commitment to this project, all kinds of content will be considered for publication.

Submission guidelines

Articles will typically range in length from 750–4,500 words, but longer pieces will be considered. Please send article submissions and inquiries about this project to editor.platypusreview@gmail.com. All submissions should conform to the *Chicago Manual of Style*.

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About the Platypus Affiliated Society

The Platypus Affiliated Society, established in December 2006, organizes reading groups, public fora, research and journalism focused on problems and tasks inherited from the “Old” (1920s–30s), “New” (1960s–70s) and post-political (1980s–90s) Left for the possibilities of emancipatory politics today.

minor influx of young socialists into the Communist Party USA (CPUSA), whose politics are more class-collaborationist than DSA’s, which has a history of struggling and an explicit association with Marxism that some find appealing. However, the membership decline is about equivalent to the membership boost that DSA experienced around the 2020 Bernie Sanders presidential campaign, radicalization around the terrible public-health response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and the Black Lives Matter uprisings that summer. DSA’s current dues-paying membership of around 67,000 is about the same as 2019’s 65,000, but down from 2021’s 85,000. DSA also has the benefit of being an organization without the internal police regime present in many of the so-called Leninist, bureaucratic, centralist sects, and it has not developed the total top-down control exercised within the WFP and other progressive NGOs. Most members have not resigned themselves to being a lobbying group subordinated to the Democratic Party leadership, as DSA was before 2016. DSA’s internal democracy is lacking, especially in that the unofficial leadership and spokespeople are elected to office to steer the organization without being subordinated to its membership. But it is far superior to the other organizations of the U.S. Left with its freedom to form factions and its underdeveloped, but present, culture of public debate. DSA’s version of the ban on factions, the infamous Democratic Centralism Clause, which states that members may be expelled if they are under the discipline of any self-defined democratic centralist organization, has not yet been applied. This can be seen in the cases of Socialist Alternative and MUG, both of which adhere to radically different organizational principles, and have not been expelled on the basis of their usage of that term. Indeed, MUG believes and publicly argues that one of the primary tasks of Marxism in DSA has been to fight for genuine democratic centralism in the organization. By democratic centralism we do not mean the bureaucratic centralism that characterizes the Left-wing sects like Socialist Alternative. These organizations tend to ban internal permanent factions, elect their leadership through ratification of an official slate, and allow no public criticism of organizational positions. When I’m using the term as something positive to pursue, I mean the sense in which it emerged in debates around the 1905 Jena Congress of the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) and was imported by both the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks to describe the principles of organization of the Russian Social Democratic Workers’ Party. By the way, in the disputes between the two, the Bolsheviks tended to emphasize the democratic side of the formula rather than the centralist one, against the Mensheviks. The issues at stake around the Jena Congress were parliamentary votes by Reichstag member Max Schippel in favor of a government naval bill; control of the Right-wing Berlin branch of the Party over the central publication *Vorwärts* (because it was published in that city); and the election campaign of a reformist, former Christian social movement

Valley DSA chapter’s endorsement process for his 2022 election campaign after the chapter attempted to schedule public meetings with him to discuss the matter. The NPC, too, has started treating Bowman as a wholly external player to the organization, which is why they didn’t include him on the list of members they criticized for banning the rail worker strike in November 2022. This means the expected consequence of expelling Bowman has already been achieved by the organization merely criticizing him and demanding that he behave in a principled way. The affair shows the way that members of socialist organizations elected to public office demand a veto on the politics of the organization. One way past it is to establish effective and explicit control of representatives by the organization’s membership. The other is to codify the independence and controlling role of the representatives, as in the case of the British Labour Party, where the Parliamentary Labour Party has baked-in rights of veto, such as the threshold of parliamentary nominations for party leader. Maintaining the freedom of the requires employing bureaucratic control over organs in that the unofficial leadership elected to office requires employing bureaucratic control over organs of membership that generate bad press for them by being critical, as in the case of the BDSPPS Working Group. More recently, DSA’s NPC reached a deadlock on the hiring of an electoral staffer for DSA. The 2021 convention mandated the hiring of two electoral staffers for the organizational, and hiring staff to contribute to the electoral work of DSA is not controversial. However, the post of Electoral Director was created by the Right-wing NPC majority for a single candidate who would not accept a salary lower than that allotted to a director, according to DSA’s internal union contract. The only position in this range currently existing is that of DSA’s national director, Maria Svart. So an electoral director position was created, and a hiring process was conducted without the details of the process or any names other than that of the original candidate the position was created for, being shared with the full NPC. The political stakes of this debate surround the fact that the candidate being considered is a senior electoral staffer for the New York chapter of the Working Families Party (WFP), which has a more class-collaborationist political approach than even DSA, endorsing the Democrat in nearly every general election, and being inconsistent in the endorsement of the most progressive candidates in staff-led organization that many in DSA are anxious to avoid becoming. An infamous example is the WFP’s endorsement of Elizabeth Warren over Bernie Sanders in the 2020 presidential campaign — in spite of the overwhelming membership support for Sanders — because the leadership was weighed at 50% of the votes in the endorsement process. Many Left commentators have seized on these crises in DSA and the decline in membership since Joe Biden’s inauguration, and have begun to count the organization out as doomed or irrelevant for the socialist movement. There has even been a

it’s true that DSA is experiencing new stresses related to a conflict between the class-collaborationist political strategy it pursued while maintaining a somewhat oppositional profile in the Trump years, and the reality of the Democratic Party now in power, which involves the pursuit of a destructive imperialist proxy war in Europe, banning a rail worker’s strike, and taking no real green-lighting more oil-drilling permits than Trump in the first two years. This stress has caused turmoil within the organization. We saw in late 2021 and early 22 the controversy over the two votes of U.S. Representative Jamal Bowman, a member of DSA — at the time endorsed by the organization — to send billions of dollars in military aid to Israel, U.S. imperialism’s client-apartheid state in the Middle East. DSA’s BDS\* and Palestine Solidarity (BDSPS) Working Group and many members of the organization called for Bowman to be expelled from DSA over these votes. DSA’s National Political Committee (NPC) instead attempted to shutter the BDSPPS Working Group and revoke its official status, and banned its Steering Committee from holding any internal leadership positions. In relation to Bowman, the NPC announced that it would not be expelling the congressman, in order to preserve DSA’s relationship to him, but that he would have to commit to refusing to vote for military aid to Israel in order to be endorsed in his 2022 election campaign. Marxist Unity Group appears to be fracturing under the stresses of “late Bidenism” and the intractably conservative nature of the Democratic Party. The time is ripe, then, not only for a retrospective, but also for a reflection on the prospects for socialism. What are the goals and tasks of the DSA? Did the economic and political turmoil of the last decade present any opportunities for emancipatory politics? How were those opportunities seized — and not seized — by the DSA, or by the Left more generally? What are the prospects for socialism in the coming decade?

On April 1, 2023, as part of its 15<sup>th</sup> Annual Convention, the Platypus Affiliated Society held a panel on the politics of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), at the University of Chicago. The speakers were Jamal Abed-Rabbo (Class Unity), D. L. Jacobs (Platypus), Harold Meyerson (Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee, DSA), and Matthew Strupp (Marxist Unity Group, a faction of the DSA). Platypus member Erin Hagood moderated the panel. An edited transcript follows.

From the early to mid-2010s, a mounting crisis within the organization. We saw in late 2021 and early 22 the controversy over the two votes of U.S. Representative Jamal Bowman, a member of DSA — at the time endorsed by the organization — to send billions of dollars in military aid to Israel, U.S. imperialism’s client-apartheid state in the Middle East. DSA’s BDS\* and Palestine Solidarity (BDSPPS) Working Group and many members of the organization called for Bowman to be expelled from DSA over these votes. DSA’s National Political Committee (NPC) instead attempted to shutter the BDSPPS Working Group and revoke its official status, and banned its Steering Committee from holding any internal leadership positions. In relation to Bowman, the NPC announced that it would not be expelling the congressman, in order to preserve DSA’s relationship to him, but that he would have to commit to refusing to vote for military aid to Israel in order to be endorsed in his 2022 election campaign. Marxist Unity Group appears to be fracturing under the stresses of “late Bidenism” and the intractably conservative nature of the Democratic Party. The time is ripe, then, not only for a retrospective, but also for a reflection on the prospects for socialism. What are the goals and tasks of the DSA? Did the economic and political turmoil of the last decade present any opportunities for emancipatory politics? How were those opportunities seized — and not seized — by the DSA, or by the Left more generally? What are the prospects for socialism in the coming decade?

The politics of the Democratic Socialists of America

Jamal Abed-Rabbo, D. L. Jacobs, Harold Meyerson, Matthew Strupp

The Platypus Review

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www:

China and the Left

Conrad Hamilton, Griffith Jones, David McMullen, Anthony Monteiro

162

platypus1917.org





formation does emerge in the future — and I'm hopeful it will — it will almost certainly not emerge out of the DSA, nor any organized component of the American Left. It will probably emerge from something much more like the trucker protests in Canada, or the Gilets Jaunes in France, or the current French anti-retirement-age-raise protests. That is where you want to look to see where there is actual promise for socialist politics. DSA has no capacity to be reformed at this point. If it ever did, that window of opportunity is closed. We need to recognize that if we are going to understand what our generation, the Millennial Left generation, did wrong and how not to repeat that in the future if such an opportunity does present itself again.

Responses

**MS:** In relation to what Harold said: yes, DSA grew in large part out of supporting Sanders in the 2016 presidential campaign, but it did this in a different way than, say, the WFP engages with candidates it supports. DSA did it as an independent expenditure and built up an organization that, at least formally, in terms of organizations of the socialist movement, has a democratic organizational structure and channels people into a membership organization. The WFP, when it makes endorsements, does it with 50% of the votes going to the leadership itself. That's an important difference. I wouldn't overstate the ability to repeat that again. Bernie's campaign attracted a lot of support, not just because he was running in the Democratic Party, but because it was a particular moment when Hillary was seen as the heir apparent to Obama and many who had participated in Occupy, etc., were dissatisfied and didn't want the election to be Hillary vs. a Republican. There was a political conjuncture where supporting Bernie, and doing it as an independent organization, allowed for DSA to grow. It takes a different, more democratic form than other organizations on what could be called the Left, but they're not really part of the Left; they are liberal organizations. To respond to what the Platypus speaker said: I do think we need a new start in politics that goes beyond what DSA already says, what happened in Occupy, and the negative legacies of the Left. But a new start doesn't come out of nowhere. If we're thinking of Platypus's periodization, the Old Left — they call it the Old Left, the 1920s and 30s — refers to the communist movement, which came out of a split in the preexisting social democratic movement. The New Left came out of organizations that were already affiliated to the Old Left. SDS was started by the United Auto Workers as a youth league. Politics doesn't come out of correct ideas or breaking with everything that was bad in the past without engaging with the existing movement and organizations that have already sprung up in the course of class struggle.

To respond to Class Unity speaker Jamal's arguments: progressive Democrats aren't refusing DSA endorsements because DSA is a bunch of subcultural freaks. It's because DSA has political positions that are not compatible with the Democratic Party leadership. DSA has several chapters that have said that candidates have to abide by the BDS movement on Israel. That's unacceptable for U.S. foreign policy. Another thing is DSA's rejection of police budgets in certain situations. That becomes unpopular because there's been a rehabilitation of popularity for the police in mainstream U.S. politics. Jamal was saying that DSA is PMC, it has adopted the dominant ideology in society, but I don't see how that could be compatible with his explanation for why progressive Democrats refuse DSA endorsements.

As far as the questions of DSA's class composition go, Jamal's is not a good explanation, because this is a problem that socialists have faced for over a century. With Marx's philosophy and the proletariat, philosophy wasn't already present. It was something that intellectuals had to synthesize, and people who were becoming socialists weren't necessarily coming straight out of the worker milieu. You had people like August Bebel, who was a wood turner revolutionary, but he wasn't typical of the people who were in socialist organizations in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. What they did effectively was produce politics that could connect to a mass working class, and they united on a principled political basis.

**HM:** In 2018, the Atlanta DSA local was trying to figure out what to do about the gubernatorial campaign on the Democratic Party line of Stacey Abrams — in some ways analogous to what you were just describing about Johnson's campaign here in Chicago — and they didn't endorse. The stated reason was that they would only endorse a socialist. However, they urged their members, if they were so inclined, as individuals, to go and help her campaign because she was a hell of a lot better than the Republican alternative from any Left perspective. If you're running for governor in Georgia and a socialist organization endorses you, that probably does not help. From a pragmatic and principled point of view, that's the right position. It's not just the wokeness, although wokeness is off-putting to folks we need to reach out to if we're ever going to get anywhere. It's the S-word in mainstream elections — God knows in Georgia.

You could argue that socialists were the major precinct walkers and phone bankers in AOC's initial campaign, but other members of DSA in the House, and Bernie himself and the six DSA members of the Chicago City Council, are answerable to a wide range of groups and constituencies. To echo what Matt was saying, we have to have a flexible definition of the working class. If you've been into a modern steel mill or auto factory, even before AI, it takes fewer and fewer people to produce what it used to take a lot of people to produce. I did a piece on the steel industry a number of years ago and interviewed the head of U.S. Steel and he said, "we get the same product out of two workers today that we used to get out of ten." That's not only because of super exploitation — it's because of machines. Meanwhile, at this university, the grad students have just voted to go union by a margin of about 10 to 1, which is the level of support for unions we're seeing at universities. We need to welcome folks like that into socialist organizations in a way that also doesn't replicate the worst of what you were talking about, Jamal: the vocabulary and certain patterns of mind that are off-putting. That's a complicated challenge for the Left. But in places like where we are now, it is growing. Let's hope they don't literally go to work for McKinsey.

**DLJ:** In terms of the Platypus periodization — there

is the third thing, the post-political Left, i.e., it's not a linear view of history. It's the way in which problems might compound in being transformed. So, to go from this experience, is not to self-lobotomize, but rather to treat it as a whole: what way would one want to transform it?

The other thing in the background is Trump. There was a "Trump bump" in the DSA's growth. Trump confused the politics of many of the Left groups that joined DSA, because, when that waned over time, people had to explain what had happened. They reached into history to try to explain to themselves why people stopped showing up: maybe we have too many middle-class or PMC members. This has been a running theme: what does it mean when those memories come back up, and how are they being utilized in the present? One has to presuppose that we have an immediate access to history such that the Jena Congress in 1905, a rank-and-file strategy, or reading Vol. 3 of *Capital* can just be utilized in the same way.

Two questions: one, I'm curious what you think, Harold, about the Harringtonism in the DSA. Matthew, last night you mentioned that Harringtonism was overthrown in the BDS resolution.<sup>39</sup> You mentioned this as well, Jamal. Does the structure of the DSA still have a Harringtonite approach to the Democratic Party?

My second question is for Matt and Jamal. My understanding behind the changing of the structure of the DSA is that it would be a way to discipline middle-class, petty bourgeois standpoints. Yes, there's always going to be middle-class people joining socialist movements — Lenin, Luxemburg, Marx, Engels, et al. But what does it mean to allow them to represent the interest of the proletariat, as opposed to "the working class"? Jamal emphasized something more at the level of the sociological composition — an emphasis on the economic, the materialist explanation for class. I bring this up because that seems to get at things from two different angles. What do we mean by "class" and even "socialists"? This wasn't immediately there when many young people joined in 2017, but now it seems to be an issue.

**JAR:** It's interesting that Matt and Harold agree that the middle-class problem isn't that big of a deal, because this goes exactly to my point: this is the underlying reason for Leninist-Harringtonite convergence in DSA. When you have an organization that's entirely middle class, it becomes difficult for that organization to say, "we're entirely middle class and that is a problem." Every major Marxist party in the history of the world has acknowledged this. You have to have the ability to reach a working-class base, which itself has to be in the driver's seat of the party. For example, in La France Insoumise<sup>40</sup> in France, this is an internal debate that is raging. People in countries with a more successful socialist movement are able to introspect and say, "this is a big deal." We claim to be fighting for the working class, but our membership is not representative of the working class. How are we going to fix that? It is a particularity of the American Left that it is difficult to even get people to acknowledge the reality of this problem. The working class is still the super majority in terms of people who have jobs and are capable of winning concessions from capital by going on strike. It doesn't matter if a bunch of nonprofit executives go on strike. Capital doesn't care. What matters is if the transit workers, sewage workers — as we're seeing in France — delivery men, or the people who work in restaurants — it matters if they go on strike. Suddenly capital says, "wait, this is hurting the bottom line — time to freak out." Wokeness is a manifestation of the underlying middle-class composition and the refusal of that composition to ask itself, what are we doing, why are we here? Are we fighting for our own sectional class interests, or are we trying to build something larger than ourselves that can be led by the broad, working-class majority of the population?

On the point about Brandon Johnson, you can say, "Johnson isn't embarrassed of DSA because of DSA's wokeness. It's probably not about the pronoun rituals, etc." It's specifically about defunding the police, which is a mega middle-class, subcultural demand that DSA got totally on board with suddenly a couple years ago, and started screaming at all their candidates, "you have to support defunding or abolishing the police." When Jeanette Taylor said, "my constituents do not want to hear about defunding or abolishing the police," DSA freaked out at her, because that is what DSA's politics is: a politics of hysterical, middle-class moralism that gloms on to whatever fashionable trend happens to be in the orbit of the Democratic-aligned nonprofit industrial complex and just runs with it off the cliff. Then a couple years later, when the progressive Democrats themselves say, "hang on, maybe that's a liability; maybe we shouldn't have said that," DSA is still all about it. If you think about what would happen if DSA actually had a program that it held its elected officials to, instead of just whining at them ineffectually when they betrayed it, that program would be the craziest, most alienating program to the working class you could ever imagine. It would not be about disciplining the middle-class membership of the DSA; it would be about the middle-class membership of the DSA using its insane program to discipline everyone else off the cliff.

From a Marxist perspective, fundamentally, the middle class is an overhead cost of production.<sup>41</sup> It is not directly tied to the creation of surplus value. It exists to manage, educate, propagandize, etc., the working class, the people involved in creating surplus value.

**HM:** The problem Jamal described about DSA has also happened to the parties of the center Left, which used to claim, stereotypically, that the Democratic Party under Roosevelt, Truman, et al., was a party of the working class. We talk about the white working class being the bastion of the Republican Party. In Western Europe, parties of the center Left are increasingly parties of the middle class. This is not peculiar to DSA, but a larger development.

Is DSA still Harringtonian? Yes, but the BDS position certainly is not. The way in which the membership surge in response to Bernie, AOC, and Trump was Harringtonian in that people were responding to social democratic appeals that still did not undercut the possibility of winning office by being a third party. You couldn't find much support for Ralph Nader's 2000 campaign. There are differences in running as a third party and working within the Democratic Party. In this vague way, it is Harringtonian.

**MS:** Moves toward discipline in DSA, especially regarding members elected to public office, is not about disciplining people who come from middle-

class backgrounds. It's about achieving unity around the politics of the working class, no matter what someone's class background is. In the case of the SPD, many of the Right wing that ended up supporting the war were in the trade-union leadership. Many were real workers, part of the industrial working class, but they made a political alliance with the big bourgeoisie. They weren't petty-bourgeois intellectuals like Rosa Luxemburg. Politics doesn't equally map on to someone's class position. Our goal is a mass movement, a mass party of millions of working people. But that's not where the socialist movement starts. What's important in starting, is democratic organization and Marxist politics. The socialist movement right now is small and middle class, but it's middle class because it's small. Movements with a mostly middle-class composition have come up with effective working-class politics in the past.

Q & A

*Matthew, you're seemingly articulating a more sophisticated version of Marxism than Jamal, but, Jamal, you're making a deeper point about how parties mediate society, that goes beyond the question of the class-composition of the party. You're pointing to how a party can instrumentalize layers of society for management, education, and propaganda. Harold, you said that Sanders sees himself as the spiritual heir of FDR, and that the DSA was founded 40 years too late, because the Sanders campaign was its real moment. I'm reminded of a book by our mutual acquaintance, Jack Ross,<sup>42</sup> who writes that DSA was almost founded one year too late, because the real moment of its founding is the George McGovern campaign (1972) and the coalition of the Democratic Party that it represents. Arguably, Sanders is not so much the spiritual heir of FDR as of McGovern. Do you see the same operationalization of a middle-class layer in and around the constituency that the Democratic Party was trying to assemble around McGovern? In a sense, all Democratic Party politics since then has been fundamentally reshaped by McGovernism.*

**HM:** It would have, had it been fundamentally reshaped by McGovern and not by the three Democrats who did win after McGovern: Carter, Clinton, and Obama. Obama is the epitome of what you were talking about: someone who is terrific on a range of social cultural issues, and then appoints Tim Geithner, a Republican as Treasury Secretary, who lets eight million families lose their homes while saving the banks. Was DSOC founded too early or too late? On defunding the police, a class analysis of DSA isn't the only analysis that illuminates this position. It's an age analysis. Older people are more afraid of being victims of crime, than the young. DSA's membership not only expanded starting in 2015, but the median age plummeted, and it used to be around my age before Bernie ran.

**DLJ:** I think of the McGovern-Fraser Commission in response to the events in 1968. Penn Kemble wrote an article at that time, where he says that the activists have overthrown the old bureaucracy and replaced it with themselves, but they won't call it a bureaucracy; they're "activists."<sup>43</sup> It feels like the same thing again. With the activists there is an Oedipal thing: they're overthrowing their parents. Now they're going to be the new bureaucracy. It can happen under the guise of anti-bureaucracy. It can happen under the guise of the "PMC," and we need to deal with them and their obsession.

**JAR:** Harold brought up a good point, which is that the phenomena that we observe in DSA can also be seen to greater or lesser, largely lesser, extents in other center-Left and Left-wing parties in the developed world: the phenomena of middle-class capture or bureaucratization of Left parties and subsequent alienation from the working-class base. This is what Piketty calls the "Brahmin Left hypothesis." There are many studies that show that this has been happening. Why does DSA have basic-bitch, Democratic Party politics all the time? Why does it always converge in this direction despite the radical pretensions of many of its members? It's because of the activist stratum of DSA. We have to contextualize how many people we're talking about. DSA at its peak had maybe 90,000 members, but DSA counts as a member anyone who pays at least \$5 a year in dues with no ideological litmus test. You're a member if you subscribe to a newsletter. The actual membership of DSA has never been higher than about 10,000 people in terms of people who actually do things, which itself only means going to one meeting a month. It has never been higher than 10% of the total paper membership of the organization. Not even by the standards of the American left has DSA ever been that. They have the same career incentives. It's just that some of them decided that DSA was going to be their niche, and others decided that in Chicago, United Working Families or in New York, WFP, etc. would be their niche.

**Moderator:** I'd like to specify this question, specifically the historical dimension of the problem. Platypus did, and Jacobs referenced this, a panel about Draper's *Anatomy of the Micro-Sect* back in 2018. On that panel, Michael Hirsch, a current member of the DSA, said that the two main problems faced by the left in the 20<sup>th</sup> century were the question of the USSR and the question of the Democratic Party. Why is it that the 20<sup>th</sup> century seems to be defined by this question of the relationship of the Left to the Democratic Party? We could even specify that to discontent with supposed bureaucratization within Left organizations, which is a common criticism of the Communist parties at the time. Why are these things recurring in the DSA?

**MS:** Capitalist politics alternates between a party of order, which appeals to forms of direct subordination within capitalist society, like the family, the relationship between boss and worker in the workplace — the right wing of capitalist politics — and forces that appeal to the false liberty of the market and the formal equality in capitalist society, the party of liberty. The Democrats are that in the U.S., and each bourgeois party can make appeals to the working class, claiming to protect their interests. The Democrats are like the Liberal Party in Britain. You had for decades Lib-Lab politicians in Britain associated with the trade-union movement, but were members of the Liberal Party. The trade unions were supporting them, and it was a class-collaborationist political alliance between a real working-class, mass, trade-union movement and a bourgeois party. This is not unique to the U.S. But the Democrats are also an imperialist party and one of the main

governing parties of the U.S.

I don't know the number of active activists in DSA. It's less than half of the dues-paying membership, but career incentives don't play into it. DSA work is almost all volunteer. Only recently have a few chapters started hiring local staff. DSA does not lead to career incentives outside of it.

**JAR:** When I talk about career incentives, I'm talking not just about being hired by DSA or running for public office, but about being embedded in the larger Democratic Party-aligned nonprofit ecosystem. If you look at the steering committee of any major city DSA chapter and look up their day jobs, you will find an overrepresentation of people who are aspiring to be politicians hired employees of politicians. In Chicago, we had a guy who was the community outreach manager for a sitting DSA alderman, who then ran for public office. He was on the Chicago DSA steering committee. There's no conflict of interest rule against that, right? Union staffers, employees of activist organizations, environmental activist organizations, abolish-the-police activist organizations — this entire Ford Foundation-funded ecosystem of major blue city democratic life — this is who is in charge of local DSA chapters, at least in major cities. You can say, obviously, they're pretty dumb because being in DSA is career suicide. This stuff is funded by charitable organizations who are in turn largely funded by billionaires. They're not funding these organizations to be effective at fighting class war. They're funding these organizations precisely to be *ineffective* at fighting class war.

**Moderator:** But, Jamal, many people before you noticed this about Leftist organizations. Why does this keep happening?

**JAR:** It's not enough to say that, but you do have to acknowledge that it's happening, which many are unwilling to do. Yes, obviously, this has happened throughout American history and, as Harold pointed out, in other center-Left parties.

*Harold, you gave the prehistory of the DSA and the New Left, DSOC and NAM, the merger going into the 1980s DSA, and that became the Left wing of the possible within the Democratic Party. It's honest — there's nothing else there. Matthew, you talk about MUG being a faction within the DSA, and from your talk last night and published writings in Marxist Unity Group or Cosmonaut, there's the specter of "we need democratic centralism; we need Kautsky; we need to return to the Gotha and Erfurt Programs." What you're trying to do, which might be taking over the DSA and instituting the right of recall — that's already in regular government. If you don't stand behind Biden when he's signing a bill because you're pissed off and didn't get your way, you might be fired, etc. If you wanted to take over an organization, you'd be better not reading Marxism, and instead read about corporate takeovers. Why do you need those things from the history of Marxism to justify what you're doing? Jacobs, by comparison, also shares a certain honesty with Harold in that he's not advocating a politics for what the DSA should be doing, but giving a micro-history of the Millennial Left, from the anti-war movement up to the current conundrum facing the DSA. Given this micro-history, Jacobs also brought up the history of Marxism. Is that necessary to give this micro-history? Jamal, you say we need to become class-first, which harkens back to the period of the 1920s–30s, which many saw as a heroic period of the working class.Implicit in that is that the era of the intermediate generation, the New Left, wasn't a heroic period of the working class. Could you talk about that omission? You called the New Left hopelessly reformist in your last appearance on a Platypus panel about the DSA, but if I were to put you in the hot seat, I'd say there's a renaissance, a struggle for socialism that takes a different or better working-class politics than that today; we're just more proximal to the New Left. It might mimic more forms of the New Left than the working class of the 20s–30s.*

**MS:** On referring to the history of Marxism when talking about socialist organizations and politics in the present, Macnair had a good line in the dialogue last night, which is that not studying history is volunteering for a lobotomy. The working class has a history of organization and politics. Studying the history of our movement is how we figure out the principles of working-class organization. The Democratic Party doesn't have democratic centralism. Getting in trouble for criticizing or not standing behind Biden is not respecting him as the elected monarch in our imperial presidency. That's not a democratic principle of organization. DSA is a membership political organization. It's not a corporation. We have models of bureaucratic or monarchical working-class organizations, like with the Lasallean labor monarchy in the ADAV<sup>44</sup> with a single elected leader who also controlled the trade unions affiliated to the organization. Marxists advocated for organizational democracy as a way to build a durable mass movement.

**DLJ:** When I was writing these remarks, I was writing about myself! It's one thing to say models, but then we're presupposing what it means to have a success, to have a defeat — what has changed, how are we receiving those forms, how are we receiving Marxism? Does one have to give a history of the Millennial Left in terms of Marxism? Perhaps not, but I was trying to embody my own experience through how I was understanding the world through Marxism. That's an open question on how it came back, and it's the question I'm trying to raise, because it wasn't just Marxism that came back. That seems popular now, but there were other parts of the Left as well. There was an imagination of FDR at one time, a "New New Deal" and the politics of full employment. To capture the full experience of the Millennials, one has to treat the Marxism that came back as an expression of something, even as a misrecognition. What did it mean that they *thought* they were having an August 4 moment, or that they needed to look to Kautsky to deal with a mass movement?

**JAR:** The way I would look at the historical genealogy of the Left — DSA being a large part of it — is the connection to the last historical reference for a functional Left in which the working class was genuinely involved — the Old Left. The Old Left died and was supplanted by the New Left. The line to the working class has been severed. There are no institutional, organizational forms in American society today that have any historical connection to what the Old Left was. This is unusual because



in other countries, e.g. France, there is a present-day manifestation of the Old Left in the trade-union movement. You can quibble and say the trade unions are reformists, but so was a lot of the Old Left. France has a living trade-union movement — a living Left in a sense — because the *soixante-huit*, the 1968 generation, were not capable of swamping the institutional formations that give life to Left politics. There are still holdouts separate from the political system that are able to keep a working-class, activist base involved and in charge of these organizations, which is not the case in the U.S. The unions are almost entirely bureaucratized and Democratic Party-aligned. Our task is to reconstruct something that resembles the Old Left’s connection to the working class. We’re not going to do this by looking for some historical link to that Old Left. We have to build something new.

**HM:** The American labor movement lost its militants before the New Left was conceived, in the 50s, for God’s sakes. No one used the term New Left because there wasn’t a New Left. I’m not here to defend the New Left, but it wasn’t like they were out to subvert a working-class movement. The working-class movement had become supine at least a decade before Port Huron. There’s also the sheer weakness of the American labor movement. In the private sector, 6% of the American workforce is unionized. Here the Democrats have continually failed to strengthen basic worker rights to join a union. They keep getting close and they never get the 60<sup>th</sup> vote in the Senate. We live in the most capitalist nation on the face of the Earth. The Democratic Party has prevailed in weakening the labor movement. If the labor movement were anywhere near the strength numerically that it had at the end of WWII, I’m not sure we’d be having this discussion.

*Jamal, you were quick to give the verdict of not guilty on the old generation for the current Left. But isn’t your language and especially your concern about class composition itself a New Left concern. For example, in Germany, where I’m from, we had a lot of K-Groups<sup>45</sup> in the 70s. They were mostly Maoist, but also Stalinist. Some of them had contentious restrictions on joining, like the KPD/ML<sup>46</sup> and the KPD-AO.<sup>47</sup> There was a joke about the KPD-AO: instead of AO, it should be OA (ohne Arbeiter), without workers, because they were all intellectuals. This is not a new concern. All these organizations, except for one in Frankfurt, are gone. What’s the difference today? Why should we not talk about this language being New Left, especially from you?*

**JAR:** This language was common in New Left milieus precisely because it recognized a problem. People were noticing a change in the class composition of Left parties, and they were trying to think through it. It’s inevitable that the New Left, as the inauguration of the middle class’s independence and supplantation of the old working-class Old Left, would ask itself, like, “where are all the workers going? How do we attract them?” That’s a healthy sign, even if you come up with dumb ideas, like having a strict system for who gets to join the organization, etc. This didn’t start with the New Left. We’ve mentioned Marx talking about the middle class and his opposition to the old socialist utopians. The distinction is that in the context of the modern American Left, we’re so divorced from the historical memory of the workers’ movement that we have to make a point to recognize it. Otherwise, if I weren’t up here talking about this, no one would be talking about it. “Of course, we’re all middle class; nothing wrong with that; Engels was bourgeois” — all these facile, instinctual self-defenses that middle-class Leftists always trot out to avoid talking about the elephant in the room.

**HM:** One of the founding assumptions of DSOC was that it had to connect people coming out of the New Left, which imploded by then, and what was left of the Old Left. DSOC was able to connect with the leaders of the more progressive unions, but it never got down to the rank and file. Jim Chapin, one of the brilliant people in early DSOC, once said, “we’re not even organized top-down; we’re organized top-sideways.” Yes, we got union presidents and staff — the people you were talking about — but it wasn’t at that point, nor today, really working-class, rank-and-file at all.

**MS:** That is a good question, because Jamal is speaking the language of the New Left more than that of the Old Left. It’s been understated how much the New Left tried to proletarianize itself.

**HM:** It didn’t work, but it tried.

**MS:** And the Revolutionary Union, the precursor to the Revolutionary Communist Party, USA, got its name for doing shop-floor struggles in the Bay Area. Macnair last night talked about how in Oxford, a city of 100,000, there were 100 Trotskyists, and between a few different organizations, they all sent their people into the car plant. The New Left tried this, but it didn’t solve the political problem that’s related to Left-wing organization, ideas, and program. That’s why politics matters. If we had all working-class activists, but we had stupid ideas and bad organization, we wouldn’t be closer to socialism. As far as the Old Left goes, Harold was talking about the CPUSA’s membership growth, the height of it being in the late 40s. Through the Popular Front, it was organizing all professionals into Popular Front organizations. That was the Old Left not caring about class background, although during the Third Period, the language of class composition and being petty bourgeois or a worker mattered.

*In the 60s, there was a Harringtonian strategy to realign the Democratic Party away from Southern whites to break up the New Deal coalition and create a space within the American political landscape for a socialist party, or at least a labor party. The DSA’s founding in 1982 is a conscious retreat from this strategy. This reorientation gets elided within the DSA’s understanding of Harrington. There’s been a pushback against Harringtonian politics on the panel, but what do you mean by Harrington, and which period? Is composition relevant to this, or is it more about politics and representation?*

**HM:** Max Shachtman came up with this strategy first: if you got the Dixie Democrats of the South out of the Democratic Party, you could have a social democratic party. I’m not stuttering on the word democratic. Most of the first generation of civil rights leaders working to get rid of the Dixiecrats were self-avowed socialists, from Philip Randolph to Bayard Rustin to King to James Farmer. By the time of the merger in 1982, there is more of a change in the Democratic

Party than in Harringtonianism. The Democratic Party had already begun its shift to the Right on economic issues. It’s this generation of Democrats, not so much the New Left, who represented, for the first time, suburban districts. They’re socially center-Left, but more conservative, moving the whole Democratic Party to the Right, which took the possibility of the social democratization of the Democratic Party off the table. You were fighting the tandem Rightward movement of the Democrats and Reagan. You couldn’t say, as Harrington did in his book *Toward a Democratic Left* (1967), that there is a hidden social democracy in the Democratic Party. It was becoming increasingly hidden around the time of the NAM-DSOC merger and the foundation of the formation of DSA.

*The panel title is The Politics of the DSA. How is it that the constituency of each speaker is a necessary aspect in terms of base building for working toward a Marxist movement? Matthew, what motivates the entryism into the DSA, rather than just forming another sect that does better Marxism, if the point is that forwarding the best platform is sufficient for establishing Marxist unity? Harold, if the function of the DSA is to operate as a platform, via the Democratic Party, for showing socialism as appealing for the Democratic Party and its voters, why not just push for would-be DSAers to enter and campaign within the Democratic Party? Jamal, if the problem with the DSA and the motivation for Class Unity’s split from it is the increasing presence of the PMC, the bureaucratization of the DSA, and the necessity for good Marxist politics is to establish a base of workers in your party, why not just join the Socialists Workers Party (U.S.) (SWP)?*

**Moderator:** Harold, what do you make of Matthew citing the Jena Conference and Jamal looking back to the Old Left?

**MS:** Why engage with the DSA? It’s not necessarily entryism because a lot of people entered DSA around 2017 when it was exploding. They weren’t already organized into *Cosmonaut* or Marxist Unity Group, which were founded in 2021–22. Even if you have the right ideas, that’s not a sufficient condition for being able to connect it to a mass, working-class movement. You have to win over the Left. You have to engage with people who already consider themselves Marxists and who already are part of the existing vanguard of the workers’ movement, and convince them of the right ideas and achieve organizational and political unity with them on the basis of a program for working-class rule. Having the right program or positions for the working class doesn’t mean anything. This is what happened in the New Left. Groups developed political lines that they thought they could bring to the workers, but at the factory they find that there’s another group there, and you either have to work with them or denounce them. A lot of self-avowed Marxist socialists are in DSA. They are thinking with Marxism. You can make Marxist arguments to them and engage in this organization of the socialist movement that is dominated by class collaborationism — it’s true — and combat that. People who are attracted to Marxist ideas don’t want to do class collaborationism.

**HM:** That’s a fine idea to revive a real working-class movement, à la the 1930s. But, it’s difficult today. We have to keep trying because the fascist Right is doing a damn good job of mobilizing working-class voters around ethnocentric concerns. The Debsian socialists (SPA) were crushed by the state in the late 1910s. Norman Thomas got almost a million votes running on the SPA line for president in 1932, and he got about a little under 200,000 four years later. Then the New Deal came along, and the masses, the unions that had backed the SPA, moved to back Roosevelt. They didn’t join the Democratic Party. In New York you had fusion voting. They set up a little party of their own, the American Labor Party, but the votes got added to Roosevelt. We need to acknowledge that America is a challenge for socialists. This is partly the function of the electoral system we have, and it’s a function of the power of capital, which is less challenged here than it always has been.

**JAR:** On the question, why not just join the SWP? — Because the Trotskyist micro-sect model also has not successfully built a working-class social base. Just because the DSA has failed doesn’t mean that we should ignore the overwhelming history of failure of tiny Leninist parties trying all sorts of different strategies. They’ve all failed. We, the American Left, have failed comprehensively across the board for a long time. We have to be honest about that. We have to look at how we failed and try not to do that again. The perhaps tens of thousands of people nationwide who are Marxist, Leftist activists are not going to create a workers’ movement. The most we can hope to do is wait til the next spontaneous working-class mobilization that could happen in response to any of a number of economic or political triggers, and we try our best to defend that working-class mobilization from what has been killing previous working-class mobilizations, such as Occupy, the Bernie bounce DSA, the Left Populist Wave in Western Europe, etc. We have more to learn from what’s going on in France right now than from the entire history of the American Left for the past 50–60 years. Those interested in how a mass, working-class mobilization in the U.S. would appear should look at what’s going on in France, and isolate those features of French political and economic organization that are conducive to mobilization that are not represented in the U.S.

**HM:** A lot of the base of the Marine Le Pen Right in France is a working class that was formerly communist. The reason for increased hope and emphasis on the working class is that it is up for grabs politically. We’ve seen that here; we’re seeing it in France.

*If the function of the DSA is to recognize that the Democratic Party and its voters are the most ripe base for developing a socialist movement in America, what motivates the DSA as something external to the Democrats? What should the role of DSA be?*

**HM:** It’s a dialectical relationship. The Democratic Party is not going to move to the Left. Although both Pew and Gallup polling shows that at least half of self-identified Democrats think positively of social democracy, socialism. There’s also polling that shows that when Democrats talk about socialism, they’re thinking of Scandinavia, and when Republicans talk about socialism, they’re thinking of the Soviet Union, and lately Venezuela. You go fishing where there are fish. I’d like more and more socialists to be avowedly socialist, to talk about doing things like setting up your own state-run factory to produce insulin at cost,

which a non-radical governor of California is doing. There are avenues for more social democratic policy that are possible if DSA and groups like it become a broader part of the Left within and without the Democratic Party. If you’re looking at getting policy changes and winning elections so that the Trumps do not return to power in 2024, it has to be within the Democratic Party as well.

**DLJ:** When you were talking about Harringtonian realignment strategy, I thought about how the Democratic Party changed. David Brooks wrote an article recently, where he said the Republican Party is becoming a multiracial, working-class party.<sup>48</sup> Following the logic of the realignment strategy, it would make more sense to do that around the Republican Party now, to put that dialectic relationship around the Republican Party. It’s not simply jumping ship to the Republican against the Democratic Party. We have a received view of what Left and Right means. When I tried to say socialism is not about how many Google searches there are for “democratic socialism,” but rather that it would come out of the conditions themselves — this has been your emphasis, Jamal. I am not as impressed by people saying “socialism.” My experience of going through the 2010s is that I knew these were the same people that did Occupy and supported Obama against Romney, who was also called a fascist. I knew that this was a playing at independence, that the Millennial Left was afraid to break with the Democratic Party. I was at an anti-war rally in February that probably would have had more people if a Republican were in office. But, because there were libertarians there, along with there were some socialists, there weren’t people. It’s safe for us to ask, do we receive Left and Right in a specific way that takes cues from capitalist politics? **JP**

*Transcribed by Ola Górczyńska, D. L. Jacobs, Louis Moensch, Noah Mayer Spore*

<sup>1</sup> Video of the panel is available online at <https://youtu.be/yg9\_kbAYyw0>.

<sup>2</sup> Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions.

<sup>3</sup> Karl Kautsky, “Constituency and Party (Wahlkreis und Partei)” (1904), trans. Ben Lewis, in “Origins of democratic centralism,” *Weekly Worker* 1081 (November 5, 2015), available online at <https://weeklyworker.co.uk/worker/1081/origins-of-democratic-centralism/>.

<sup>4</sup> Meany was the first president (1955–79) of the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO).

<sup>5</sup> Founded in 1972 as the successor of the SPA.

<sup>6</sup> The Weathermen Underground Organization was founded in 1969 as a faction of the SDS.

<sup>7</sup> Founded in 1962, following a split in the CPUSA.

<sup>8</sup> New American Movement.

<sup>9</sup> Harold Meyerson, “Why Trucking Can’t Deliver the Goods,” *The American Prospect* (February 2022), available online at <https://prospect.org/economy/why-trucking-cant-deliver-the-goods/>.

<sup>10</sup> See Joseph Schwartz and Jason Schulman, “Toward Freedom: Democratic Socialist Theory and Practice,” *Democratic Socialists of America* (December 21, 2012), available online at <https://www.dsausa.org/strategy/toward\_freedom/>.

<sup>11</sup> See David Duhalde, “The more things change, the more they stay the same: A response to Canel and Jacobs,” *Platypus Review* 144 (March 2022), available online at <https://platypus1917.org/2022/03/02/the-more-things-change-the-more-they-stay-the-same-a-response-to-canel-and-jacobs/>.

<sup>12</sup> See Joseph Schwartz’s speech on the “Medicare Birthday,” at Ithaca Commons (August 1, 2011), available at <https://youtu.be/OENGKMxGSYI>.

<sup>13</sup> See Sheryl Gay Stolberg, “Conservatives Ponder Way Out of Wilderness,” *New York Times*, February 27, 2009.

<sup>14</sup> See Josh Eidelson, “Bernie Sanders: Why I might run in 2016,” *Salon*, November 27, 2013, available online at <https://www.salon.com/2013/11/27/bernie\_sanders\_why\_i\_might\_run\_in\_2016/>: “What I think unfortunately has not happened is that there has not been a look, for example, at countries like Scandinavia, and what they have managed to accomplish for their people.”

<sup>15</sup> On the return of interest in the LTRPF, see James Heartfield, “Living Marxism,” *Platypus Review* 9 (December 2008), available online at <https://platypus1917.org/2008/12/01/living-marxism/>.

<sup>16</sup> David Haack, “The New Left zombie is dead! Long live Occupy!,” *Platypus Review* 45 (April 2012), available online at <https://platypus1917.org/2012/04/01/new-left-zombie-is-dead-long-live-occupy/>.

<sup>17</sup> See Christie Offenbacher and Benjamin Y. Fong, “Occupy in Retrospect,” *Catalyst* 5, no. 4 (Winter 2022), available online at <https://catalyst-journal.com/2022/03/occupy-in-retrospect/>.

<sup>18</sup> See Eric Alterman, James Antle, Ayesha Kazmi, Sally Kohn, Doug Guetzloe, Frances Fox Piven, and Douglas Rushkoff, “Occupy Wall Street and the Tea Party compared” *The Guardian*, October 7, 2011, available online at <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/cifamerica/2011/oct/07/occupy-wall-street-tea-party>.

<sup>19</sup> Peter Nicholas, “Socialism Network Finds New Friends,” *Wall Street Journal*, December 11, 2015.

<sup>20</sup> See Kelly Riddell, “Hillary Clinton casts herself as pragmatic progressive, Bernie Sanders as unrealistic,” *The Washington Times*, February 11, 2016, available online at <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2016/feb/11/hillary-clinton-casts-herself-pragmatic-progressive/>.

<sup>21</sup> Friedrich Engels, “Historical Materialism,” in *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* (1880), available online at <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1880/soc-utop/ch03.htm>.

<sup>22</sup> See Amber Jameison, “Trump to Bernie Sanders supporters: ‘We welcome you with open arms,’” *The Guardian*, June 7, 2016, available online at <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/jun/07/donald-trump-bernie-sanders-supporters-clinton-nomination>. Sanders would later say that Trump was the “most racist, sexist, homophobic, bigoted president in history.” See Tal Axelrod, “Bernie Sanders calls Trump ‘most racist, sexist, homophobic, bigoted president in history’,” *The Hill*, October 31, 2018, available online at <https://thehill.com/homenews/campaign/414133-bernie-sanders-calls-trump-most-racist-sexist-homophobic-bigoted-president/>.

<sup>23</sup> See Tom Canel, “The Millennial Left and the Democratic Party: A response to D. L. Jacobs,” *Platypus Review* 140 (October 2021), available online at <https://platypus1917.org/2021/10/01/the-millennial-left-and-the-democratic-party-a-response-to-d-l-jacobs/>.

<sup>24</sup> See Jason Schulman and Bernard Sampson, “Sanders, the Democrats, and the Left,” *Platypus Review* 86

(May 2016), available online at <https://platypus1917.org/2016/05/03/sanders-democrats-left/>, where they quote “Julius Jacobson, “The Duality of the Jackson Campaign,” *New Politics* 2, no. 2 (Summer 1988): 5–6: “‘To take advantage of the facilities offered by the Democratic Party primary involves no necessary compromise of socialist principles,” provided that these facilities are being used “as a vehicle for propagandizing a position with an eye on building a movement outside the Democratic Party.””

<sup>25</sup> Andrew Basta, Jack Clark, Jamal Abed-Rabbo, Lance Selfa, “What is the Democratic Socialists of America?,” *Platypus Review* 137 (June 2021), available online at <https://platypus1917.org/2021/06/02/what-is-the-democratic-socialists-of-america/>.

<sup>26</sup> Daniel Denvir, “Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, In Her Own Words: An Interview with Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez,” *Jacobin*, July 11, 2018, available online at <https://jacobin.com/2018/07/alexandria-ocasio-cortez-interview-democratic-primary>.

<sup>27</sup> See Juan C., “Ocasio-Cortez’s Win: Opportunities and Challenges for the Left,” *Left Voice*, June 30, 2018, available online at <https://www.leftvoice.org/Ocasio-Cortez-s-Win-Opportunities-and-Challenges-for-the-Left/>.

<sup>28</sup> Jared Abbot and Dustin Guastella, “A Socialist Party in Our Time?,” *Catalyst* 3, no. 2 (Summer 2019), available online at <https://catalyst-journal.com/2019/10/a-socialist-party-in-our-time>. A prototype can also be found in 2016 and was again suggested with the 1-2-3-4 Plan. See Seth Ackerman, “A Blueprint for a New Party,” *Jacobin*, November 8, 2016, available online at <https://jacobin.com/2016/11/bernie-sanders-democratic-labor-party-ackerman/>.

<sup>29</sup> See Barbara Ehrenreich and John Ehrenreich, “The professional-managerial class,” in *Between Labor and Capital*, ed. Pat Walker (Boston: South End Press, 1979), 45.

<sup>30</sup> Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, Letter to August Bebel, Wilhelm Liebknecht, Wilhelm Bracke, and others (September 17–18, 1879), available online at <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1879/letters/79\_09\_15.htm>: “If people of this kind from other classes join the proletarian movement, the first condition is that they should not bring any remnants of bourgeois, petty-bourgeois, etc., prejudices with them but should whole-heartedly adopt the proletarian point of view. But these gentlemen, as has been proved, are stuffed and crammed with bourgeois and petty-bourgeois ideas. In such a petty-bourgeois country as Germany these ideas certainly have their own justification.”

<sup>31</sup> Incidental expenses; literally, “false costs.”

<sup>32</sup> For example, see J. R. Murray, “The Retrograde Left,” *Cosmonaut* (May 4, 2019), available online at <https://cosmonaut.blog/2019/05/04/the-retrograde-left/>, and Michael Hirsch, Jim Creegan, Spencer A. Leonard, “Beyond sect or movement: What is a political center?,” *Platypus Review* 119 (September 2019), available online at <https://platypus1917.org/2019/09/01/beyond-sect-or-movement-what-is-a-political-center/>.

<sup>33</sup> See Michael Harrington, “Marxism and Democracy,” *Praxis International* 1, no. 1 (1981): 6–22, available online at <https://socialistforum.dsausa.org/issues/fall-2021/marxism-and-democracy/>.

<sup>34</sup> International Socialist Organization, dissolved in 2019.

<sup>35</sup> See Benedict Cryptofash, “The Left is not a concept,” *Platypus Review* 142 (December 2021 – January 2022), available online at <https://platypus1917.org/2021/12/01/the-left-is-not-a-concept/>.

<sup>36</sup> Doug Greene, *A Failure of Vision: Michael Harrington and the Limits of Democratic Socialism* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2022). See the reviews by Tom Canel and Jack Clark, *Platypus Review* 149 (September 2022), available online at <https://platypus1917.org/category/pr/issue-149/>.

<sup>37</sup> Walter Benjamin, “Experience and Poverty” (1933), in *Selected Writings: Volume 2, Part 2, 1931–1934*, eds. Michael W. Jennings, et al., trans. Rodney Livingstone, et al. (Cambridge: The Belknap Press, 2005), 732.

<sup>38</sup> See, for example, “US Socialist Convention Ridiculed After Righteous Outburst Over ‘Gender Pronouns,’” *On Demand News* (August 8, 2019), available online at <https://youtu.be/m0We3rk7LzQ>, and “Steyn reacts to chaos at Democratic Socialist convention,” *Tucker Carlson Tonight* (August 5, 2019), available online at <https://youtu.be/Mp0dnJgWKZi>.

<sup>39</sup> Mike Macnair and Matthew Strupp, “Revolutionary strategy & neo-social democracy: A trans-Atlantic dialogue” (March 31, 2023), held as part of Platypus’s 15<sup>th</sup> Annual Convention, video of which is available at <https://youtu.be/18G5Sxe3RNE>, starting at 1:55:25.

<sup>40</sup> France Unbound.

<sup>41</sup> JAR points to Class Unity’s article, “The Left’s Middle-Class Problem” (January 3, 2022), available online at <https://classunity.org/2022/01/03/the-lefts-middle-class-problem-a-response-to-tempest/>.

<sup>42</sup> See Jack Ross, *The Socialist Party of America: A Complete History* (Lincoln: Potomac Books, 2015).

<sup>43</sup> Penn Kemble, “The New Politics and the Democrats,” *Commentary* (December 1972), available online at <https://www.commentary.org/articles/penn-kemble/the-new-politics-the-democrats/>.

<sup>44</sup> Allgemeiner Deutscher Arbeiter-Verein (General German Workers’ Association).

<sup>45</sup> K-Gruppen, also known as Kommunistische Gruppen (Communist Groups).

<sup>46</sup> Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands / Marxisten-Leninisten (Communist Party of Germany / Marxists-Leninists).

<sup>47</sup> Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands (Aufbauroganisation) (Communist Party of Germany (Pre-Party Formation)).

<sup>48</sup> David Brooks, “A 2024 Presidential Candidate Who Meets the Moment,” *New York Times*, July 14, 2022.



activist under the SPD's name, but without the support of the national Party organization. These issues can be closely analogized to the many issues in DSA I've just discussed. The answer of those in favor of democratic centralization was to establish effective control of the whole party's membership over its central institutions, electoral candidates, and publications, while maintaining a right to criticize party positions in the press and organize to change its policy. As Karl Kautsky, in his article "Constituency and Party" (1904), wrote in contribution to this debate, "We are not dealing with the freedom of opinion of the masses, but the freedom of action of the leaders. Democracy does not mean the absence of rule, it does not mean anarchy: it means the rule of the masses over their representatives, in distinction to other forms of rule, where the supposed servants of the people are in reality their masters."<sup>3</sup>

Establishing the rule of DSA's membership over its official and unofficial leadership can be pursued by a handful of different avenues. DSA can set clear expectations for the conduct and policy of members elected to public office. Socialist caucuses can be organized in legislative bodies to coordinate the actions of these representatives. DSA can run its candidates on clearly delineated slates who all endorse each other and run on a common platform. DSA's NPC can eliminate its use of secret executive sessions in discussing political questions, and make its debates more public. DSA's publications can become a much more vibrant place for debate on the organization's strategy and policy since *Democratic Left* has been cut down to a two-page glossy mailer. All of these are steps toward genuine democratic centralism. The prospects for socialism in the U.S. in the coming decade will depend on the outcome of the struggle against the politics of class collaborationism and for genuine democratic centralism in DSA. If Marxists fail, the organization will go back to what it was from its inception in 1982, until the membership explosion after 2016: a sclerotic Democratic Party lobbying group. The various Left formations that have concentrated in the organization will go back to being separate, feuding, small organizations. The task of uniting them on a principled basis would remain, but it would be much more difficult to do on that basis than in a joint struggle to transform a reformist organization in which they're already present.

**Harold Myerson:** I'm told I am here as the designated geezer to discuss the origins of the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee (DSOC) and DSA, with some comments on the present.

DSOC was formed in a way-overdue split, in what was, by then, the shell of the Socialist Party of America (SPA), with a majority actually wedded to the Cold War idiocy of the George Meany<sup>4</sup> — not yet Lane Kirkland — regime supporting the Vietnam War. Even great Leftists like Bayard Rustin ended up — for a variety of convoluted reasons — supporting the Vietnam War. I didn't join DSOC for its first couple of years because I thought the struggle against the people who then formed Social Democrats, USA<sup>5</sup> — the people around the Meany regime — was extraneous to the issues of the country. Basically, DSOC created a social democratic organization that had aspirations of functioning in the broader American Left, including unions and union leaders who were the opponents of the Meany-Cold War regime. It meant — and here I need to get its sociological purpose — working with those coming out of the experience of the New Left. Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) had more or less dynamited itself literally and figuratively at the end of the 1960s. In its early days, DSOC — and this was partly Michael Harrington's desire — to make amends for him having been a jerk at Port Huron, where he attended the founding meeting of SDS, and was way too critical of a bunch of 20-year-olds who were trying to come up with a manifesto for what was, at that point, the nascent New Left. DSOC tried to be a meeting point between veterans of the 1930s and veterans of the New Left, who decided that the Weather Underground<sup>6</sup> and the Progressive Labor Party,<sup>7</sup> which was at least self-designated as Maoist, didn't have much to offer the American Left or American workers.

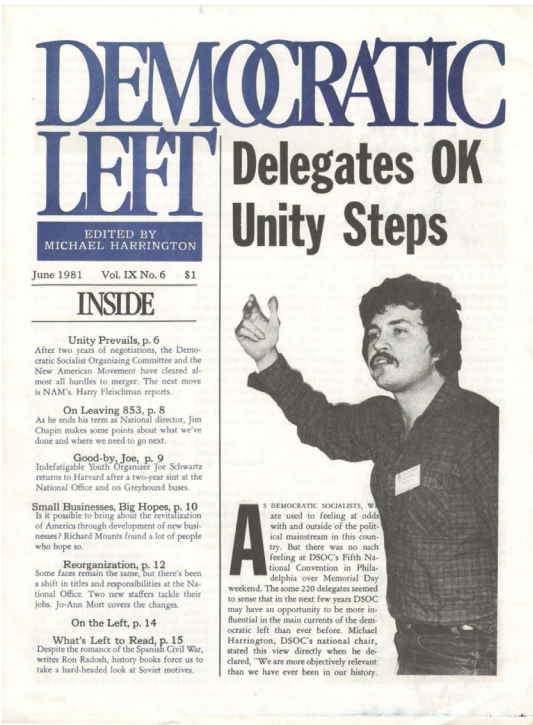
DSOC tried to assemble these groups together and function within the Democratic Party. This was about 40 years premature, and it was not tried as a mega strategy until Bernie Sanders ran in the Democratic primaries in 2015 and 2016. The notion was that for all of the flaws in the Democratic Party, you could get more visibility for social democracy and socialism by running as a Democrat than if you were in an independent party. American history has confirmed that judgment. The fact that Bernie Sanders got 10 times the vote that Eugene Debs got at his high point in 1912 suggests that the level of visibility running in the Democratic Party, with the kind of ideas that Sanders was advancing, is not only speaking to a much larger public, but becoming a magnet for people who had those politics but didn't know where to go. This was at a time when the U.S., having a winner-take-all, no-proportional-representation electoral system, was facing a binary choice. We face binary choices on Election Day. We may have third parties, but they don't figure strongly into the future direction of the U.S. — the exception being the CPUSA in the 1930s, which became organizers for the CIO.

One of the major reasons the Communists succeeded in the 1930s and the Socialists went down the tubes, was that the Communists supported Franklin D. Roosevelt. In fact, in 1944, they abolished the CPUSA, so no one would run against Roosevelt. They became an association because Stalin was an ally of Roosevelt, and that decided that. This marked the highpoint of membership in the CPUSA, just as Bernie Sanders's run, particularly in 2015–16, led to the explosive growth of DSA — a defining event in DSA's history.

We would not be here discussing this — different groups would not be dissenting against DSA, which would not be worth dissenting against — but for the fact that it grew tremendously when Sanders became a champion of what he called democratic socialism, what I would call social democracy. I attended both the speeches, in 2015 and 19, at the inauguration of Bernie's campaigns, where he was advocating for his program, but he mentioned that he was really the spiritual layer of Franklin Roosevelt. I remember going back to the offices of the *American Prospect* and saying, "in the 1930s, Republicans kept saying Roosevelt is a socialist, and today, Bernie Sanders said they were right." That was the crucial Sanders *de facto* Harringtonism. In

their early years, DSOC and DSA tried to put together progressive coalitions. It might be in some ways analogous to the WFP, given the lack of a mass base and the high share of policy people and intellectuals. This usually took the form of suggesting social democratic reforms for the democratic platform. I would point out that both DSOC and NAM,<sup>8</sup> the two organizations that came together to form DSA in 1982, were formed in the early 70s. This was just at the end of the period when the New Deal social contract was still more or less alive and had been augmented by the Civil Rights Movement of the 60s, so that the gains that were established in the New Deal became widely shared by not just white people. This was a huge revolution of the 60s. But, capitalism wasn't, to the broad Left and the broad liberal community, something that was widely questioned. We certainly did. I wrote a piece recently about the deregulation of trucking that happened at the end of the 1970s.<sup>9</sup> Many truckers had decent contracts negotiated by a very smart union leader named Jimmy Hoffa — never mind the corruption; the guy was brilliant. A contract covering 450,000 workers, starting in 1965, given the size of the labor force — that was impressive to get 800 companies signing on. Both Kennedy and Carter ran against each other in the 1980 Democratic primaries, and supported the deregulation of trucking. One of the major reasons for that — and this gives you a sense of the mindset of the 70s — was, "we're not plunging anyone into poverty. The American workers are still going to be okay."

We didn't think that. One of the lines Harrington used in speech after speech was, "we have to go as far beyond Roosevelt as Roosevelt went beyond Hoover, or we are going back to Hoover." We saw the New Deal, we saw the welfare state as a political achievement that could move either way. The fact that we were right didn't mean we had any better success than anyone else in stopping the Reagan Revolution and the demoralizing effect of the 1980s. In the 80s, everyone on the Left — loosely defined here — was fighting defensive battles. Everything that had been won in the 30s and 60s was up for grabs, and a lot of it was lost. And the organization, which had a certain vibrance in the 70s — NAM independently, DSOC independently — came together in 82. This was not a great moment for the American Left, and the unraveling of the New Deal order, which proceeded for the next 25 years, was demoralizing. The major event that brings us here, whether we acknowledge it or not, is Bernie Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (AOC). Otherwise, DSA would not be a mass organization like it is, and we wouldn't be contesting for it. There are lessons there in terms of party strategy that have significance as we go forward.



Cover of *Democratic Left* IX, no. 6 (June 1981)

**D. L. Jacobs:** I was a member of the Young Democratic Socialists of America at my first Platypus Convention. I remember attending a "Differing Perspectives on the Left," a kind of teach-in that would be given by one of the invited groups. I naturally attended the DSA teach-in. I fondly remember a question from the audience: would you consider Finland a socialist state? The DSA representative answered, "yes," and I felt uneasy by the capitulation. I frequently wonder now what I would have thought about all of the Marxists and Leninists in the DSA. I was taught that Lenin had a rather "instrumentalist"<sup>10</sup> view of the state and could not account for why the Tea Party Koch Brothers (who were called fascists) were so vitriolic toward government-run healthcare.

The older Millennial members of the DSA that I knew would have first been politicized around the anti-Iraq War and alter-globalization protests, but in particular, what hung over them was disappointment with Obama.<sup>11</sup> Obama was called "at best a very moderate neoliberal Democrat,"<sup>12</sup> which would have meant that he was good on social issues but poor on domestic policy. This means the idea of socialism that I received was conditioned by disappointment with Obama's New "New Deal." Hence, when DSA members would say, "Obama is not a socialist, but I am," they meant he didn't go far enough in the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, including when they would genuflect towards economic democracy and socializing the banks that crashed Wall Street. The Tea Party and the 2010 midterms frightened the Left into circling the wagons around the Democrats. In 2009, Newt Gingrich spoke of Obama's "European socialism transplanted to Washington."<sup>13</sup> They merely wished this was true.<sup>14</sup>

In fact, the current Millennial fixation on the "long-run tendency for the rate of profit to fall," reflected the experience of the late 2000s through Occupy.<sup>15</sup> It was repurposed from Marxism to counter the popularity of the Austrian Business Cycle. The latter seemed plausible in the era of easy money and bank runs, but it implied the "rolling back of the state," and so was "Right-wing."

2011 in general — Arab Spring, Wisconsin, and Occupy — seemed to put the Left back on the table. Occupy was already considering overcoming the "zombie of the New Left,"<sup>16</sup> although later DSA would come to characterize Occupy as the last gasp of Generation X, in order to distance itself from its past.<sup>17</sup> It is not that Occupy was the moment that was missed, as some anarchists might feel, but rather that this earlier period — before and during the Obama presidency — had a greater sense of

openness about the possibilities of what a Left could be. The standard account given by many is that the decade has been an advance from the inchoate, starry-eyed activism of the earlier part of the 2010s, through the Bernie campaign's politicization, onto the highest consciousness in their Marxist faction. Under the appearance of greater definiteness, the post-2015 period is a retrogression in horizons. It tailed the crisis of capitalism put through by Trump. What's interesting is that it was Donald Trump and Tea Party Doug Guetzloe who recognized the affinity of Occupy and the Tea Party, whereas the Left was quick to distinguish itself from the Tea Party.<sup>18</sup>

The doldrums of the present would have likely happened if Clinton won in 2016. While Sanders was called a "socialist gift from the gods,"<sup>19</sup> it was Trump that delivered the goods. People joined DSA because of the promise that Bernie would have defeated Trump, after they were promised this by the "pragmatic progressive" Hillary Clinton.<sup>20</sup> I remember asking an activist if they were concerned that most of their new recruits had joined because of Trump's victory. They first said, "yes," but then said, "but isn't it good that all of these people joined socialist organizations?" One of the justifications for participating in the DSA was that you had a lot of young, excited people talking about socialism. If one stays outside of this, nothing you say will matter; instead, one needs to work through socialism as it appears. But this was a dangerous contradiction: the Left had to implicitly hold themselves as better Democrats while promising "that true democratic socialism would go even further."

Socialism, for Friedrich Engels, was "nothing but the reflex, in thought,"<sup>21</sup> of the contradiction of forces and relations of production. The potential for socialism was not to be found in the number of Google searches for "democratic socialism" but rather in a means of making explicit the crisis of society. Let us not forget the basic truth: capitalist politics is socialist. Francois Guizot called Louis Bonaparte's regime the "complete and final triumph of socialism!" He wasn't wrong. What was potentially emancipatory for Marx, was proletarian socialism, *not socialism per se*, not even *workers' socialism*. For the working class has an inseparable interest in both labor and capital; wages are capital but measured according to labor. Proletarian socialism takes the sides of this contradiction to the extreme, realizing and overcoming both labor and capital. Trump said that Sanders had many "good ideas"<sup>22</sup> — there was no reason to treat DSA as the "only game in town."<sup>23</sup>

Before the 2016 election, the advantage of the Democratic Party was that its "big tent" character allowed one to take advantage of the facilities without compromising principles;<sup>24</sup> now, that advantage was ascribed to DSA itself. After 2016, almost every socialist group on the Left joined the DSA in one way or another — at least to make an "intervention." In doing so, they buttressed the default position of DSA towards the Democrats: this was an unconscious reception of a strategy that was more explicitly formed in the post-New Left. As Jack Clark has pointed out, the point of the realignment tendency in early DSA was never about capturing the Democratic Party, but trying to create a "principled liberal party . . . [Such that a] socialist could have a greater intellectual influence on the shaping of mainstream American politics."<sup>25</sup> In DSA, this has collided with the waves of Millennial Marxism.

While it is now fashionable to bash her, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez was considered a promising victory in the summer of 2018. It was emphasized that she was a "member of the Democratic Socialists of America"<sup>26</sup> and consequently, DSA membership spiked after her win.<sup>27</sup> The defeat of local DSA candidates and the end of AOC's "honeymoon" put electoral politics on the backburner until Sanders's February 2020 surprise. The idea of a "party-surrogate" was again floated.<sup>28</sup> Strategy then shifted towards the Millennial rediscovery of "base-building," which began at the beginning of the 2010s but became an alternative in the face of disappointment with DSA-endorsed Democratic candidates.

Whereas the New Left called the Democratic Party "labor aristocrats," the Millennials and Zoomers have preferred to call them the "professional managerial class" (PMC). Indeed, the ruling Democrats probably are the PMC's of the New Left described by Barbara and John Ehrenreich.<sup>29</sup> But nobody talks about the PMC more than the PMC. After the 2018 midterms, PMC-working class "cleavage" was the fulcrum upon which DSA activism was to wrest the downwardly mobile working-class American from their Democratic Party PMC. Now, after Biden, it's the DSA that has an ostensible "middle-class problem." Everything keeps coming back to the emphasis on how to build "class independence." Members of the DSA have revived the rank-and-file strategy. The solution is to be found in the "class composition" of the DSA, which seems to be damagingly middle-class. Thus, Marx and Engels's "Circular Letter" from 1879<sup>30</sup> is reached for to explain the stagnation: the problem is the horde of petty-bourgeois careerists and their HR management. They need to have a program to discipline them.

The PMC gets naturalized under "Marxist analysis." Had not Marx talked about the "intermediate strata" of unproductive workers, those who do not produce surplus value but make up the *faux frais*<sup>31</sup> of the capitalist apparatus? Marx goes from pillar to post, and regresses back to Adam Smith. For here, production gets turned into something sectoral and parochial, something "real" rather than "speculative" or intangible. But Marx's point was that the socialization of production means the laborer is socialized as well; capital requires all of society in the final instance. For even if it did turn into or sprout the desired proletarian socialist party, the very act of a worker joining such a party would be bourgeoisifying, as even the act of journalism was, according to Lenin. But more importantly, the function of this theory has been to explain to DSA activists why they find themselves in a blind alley.

In 2018–19, Hal Draper's *Anatomy of the Micro-Sect* (1973) became a popular pamphlet among the Millennial Left.<sup>32</sup> This seemed appropriate — the ebb in energy of the Millennial Left and the exchange between "electoralists" and "base-builders" seemed to be the repetition of the 70s. Draper's pamphlet was drugged up out of wish fulfillment, the attempt to master the fear that the Millennial Left would replenish the ecology of microsects.

But the DSA has succeeded in a significant sense — it has conquered its rivals. "Democratic Socialism" was defined in contradistinction to the "undemocratic socialization" of the Soviet Bloc,<sup>33</sup> and yet the CPUSA was in DSA after 2017, and it is not hard to find

Marxist-Leninists in DSA today. The old ISO<sup>34</sup>-DSA rivalry? DSA won that in 2019. MAGA-Communism, the anti-Leftism of "Benedict Cryptofash,"<sup>35</sup> or even the recent polemical biography of Michael Harrington<sup>36</sup> — all of these are symptomatic responses to the disappointment of DSA, but the reality of DSA is shown in how they determine themselves against DSA, like a pseudo-repetition of the communist vs social-democratic split. It really is the vacuum of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This points towards the possibility of revitalizing socialism in the coming decade. For if the DSA has concentrated the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in some fashion at all, perhaps this gives us a means to start over. Walter Benjamin once suggested the need for "a new kind of barbarism."<sup>37</sup> Much has happened in the past decade and a half, but we seem to have a poverty of experience. This is perhaps strangely consoling — it means that we could make a new start, without fear of losing something that's never been gained.

**Jamal Abed-Rabbo:** I'll start by describing a bit of my relationship with the DSA. I joined in 2017 in the middle of the "Bernie bounce," and formed Class Unity with some other friends in 2019 following the disastrous DSA convention of that year — the one with the famous "don't use gendered language" moment that went viral and went on Fox News, etc.<sup>38</sup> At that point, it was clear, to anyone with a brain, that something seriously wrong was happening in DSA, that whatever promise there had been in the organization as an extension of the mass mobilization around the 2016–17 Bernie bounce was in the process of being lost. I'll give you an anecdote from a few weeks ago. Here in Chicago, we're seeing a mayoral race between Paul Vallas, a quasi-Republican cop guy, and Brandon Johnson, an Elizabeth Warren-endorsing race grifter, progressive Democrat. Johnson is exactly the kind of guy you'd expect DSA to love to endorse because he has their politics, but they haven't endorsed him. And so you might think that DSA is growing a backbone, and they're not endorsing every progressive Democrat who comes around. Wrong. They haven't endorsed him because Brandon Johnson's campaign told DSA, "please don't endorse us; it would be such a liability if you endorsed us."

This is the point, the depths to which the DSA has sunk. Forget all this talk about it being a mass party, having a mass membership. That was never true, but it's certainly not true anymore. It has no organizational capacity. It has no way to enforce any sort of platform on any politician it might endorse. It has no connection to any sort of working-class constituency. It's been reduced to an organization whose membership desperately wants to endorse progressive Democrats, but that is so embarrassing to those same progressive Democrats due to its politics and propensity for unlimited subcultural freakishness. How did we get to this point? There are two kinds of prevailing theories that I've heard banded about on the Marxist Left.

One theory blames Harold Meyerson's generation, as if to say it was all Michael Harringtonism from the start, and it's never been anything but Harringtonism. It's not Harold's generation's fault. It's not their fault. It's the fault of the Bernie bounce wave. We can't look backwards to find a historical genealogy for why DSA failed, because the Harringtonites were no longer relevant. As soon as the membership explosion happened in 2016–17, they had absolutely no influence on the structure of the organization or its direction.

The second theory is the quasi-Leninist theory that we heard from Matthew, our representative for Marxist Unity, which is that DSA didn't have a platform; it didn't have a Leninist organizational model; it wasn't democratic centralist enough. This is fundamentally self-indulgent because it holds out the prospect of "if we just did the same thing but in a more Leninist way, we wouldn't have the same problems." But that completely elides the actual reason that this happened, which is that the DSA's class composition from the start was not conducive to properly socialist, Left politics, and that that class composition inevitably led to the prevalence of what Adolph Reed, Jr. has called the politics of the Left-wing of neoliberalism. This politics is a form of labor discipline for the middle class. This is how middle-class people in various university settings, NGOs, media, are disciplined by their bosses. They internalize that and discipline themselves psychologically. They discipline each other as a way of conducting intra-middle-class career competition. They discipline the working class with it in those domains where they come into contact with the working class. Any initial burst of working-class membership that entered DSA at the time of the 2016 Sanders campaign was systematically kicked out or they systematically left. By 2019, they were all gone. At the local level, chapters are run by people who often are literal HR managers. If you look at the membership of DSA steering committees, executive committees, and major chapters around the country, you'll find a shocking number of literal managers, McKinsey consultants, and all sorts of people who are embedded in these professional-class jobs and this professional-class ecosystem. If you try to take this social base and build something socialist out of it, it's just not going to work because the same problems are going to arise.

At this point, you have to ask, what are we going to do? We have to start with the recognition that you can't will middle-class people into having a different class consciousness than the one that is actually their own. If you take an organization of a couple tens of thousands of middle-class people with middle-class career incentives and put them in a box, they're going to redevelop the politics of Harringtonism without any influence from actual Harringtonites, because that is the path of least resistance to achieving what they want in their immediate career environment. This is why all DSA chapters converge on the alienating practices that make it impossible for any regular person to join and accomplish anything within them. If you are a middle-class Leftist, that doesn't mean you can't have good politics. It's not impossible for you to overcome your immediate career imperatives and fight for the interests of the working class, but it does mean that, in the aggregate, an organization composed entirely of that stratum probably can't have good politics. How are we going to prevent the same thing from happening — the same process of the middle-class activist stratum parasitizing and lobotomizing the next quasi-socialist organization that comes around?

I don't have the answer to that, but that is what we have to keep in mind. If a working-class political